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ABSTRACT

The principles of synergy, particularly as described by Charles Hampden-Turner in "Maps of the Mind," can be applied to critical thinking in television broadcasting. Synergy is the process by which one need or person combines optimally with another. A metaphor for the idea of the concrete and the abstract working together while they are at the same time at opposite ends of a continuum is the tetrahedron, triangles combined in such a way as to form a three-dimensional structure of strength and integrity. The sides of these triangles can be named to represent values and processes involved in creating and evaluating a miniature artistic as well as commercial television presentation--the 30-second spot. Analysis of what one sees and hears on television establishes a way to make the media problematic to students. An analysis of three 1987 Clio award-winning commercials illustrates the quality and sophistication of communicating meanings and persuasions by means of television techniques, skills, and artistic principles. In these commercials, information is communicated in abstract and concrete ways--both work together. It is important for students to analyze what is seen and heard on television by questioning the abstract and concrete aspects of information. (Three figures are included.) (MM)

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CONFRONTING THE CONCRETE AND THE ABSTRACT IN CRITICAL THINKING

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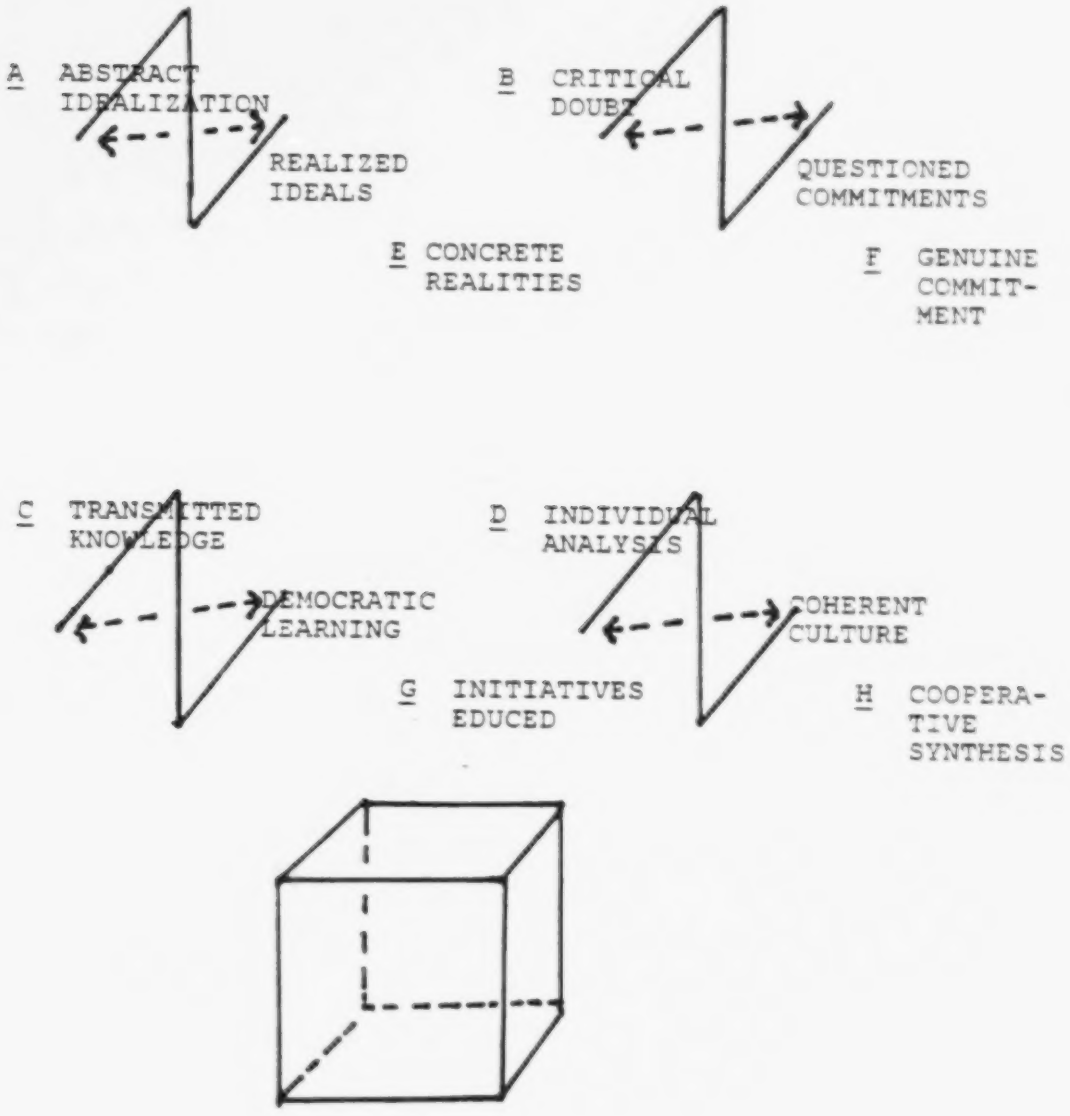
> The capacity for an abstract intellectuality is axiomatic, as is the necessity of dealing with the concrete, the practical and the real. It is obvious, surely, that the scholar must embrace all these values, going up the abstraction ladder the better to come down, and systematically doubting his convictions. Charles Hampden-Turner

In Maps of the Mind, Charles Hampden-Turner describes the "synergistic mind" combining the thoughts of Buckminster Fuller, Ruth Benedict and Abraham Maslow. Fuller defines synergy as the behavior of whole systems unpredicted by the behavior of their parts. The synergistic idea was introduced into social science by the anthropologist and poet Ruth Benedict, and Maslow, in his study of 'self-actualizing persons', those who in history and contemporary society have demonstrated outstanding creativity and achievement, found that the dichotomy between heart and head disappeared where they became synergistic rather than antagonistic. Maslow was concerned with synergy as the process by which one need (or person) can combine optimally with another. From the Greek root synergia synergy translates as meaning 'a working with.'

A metaphor for the idea of the concrete and the abstract working together while they are at the same time at opposite ends of a continuum is the tetrahedran, combined triangles (broken at one corner each) in such a way as to form a three-dimensional structure that has strength and integrity. For Hampden-Turner when four triangles are combined into a cube, the cube becomes a symbol of the way in which human values and mind combine to form integrity. (Figure 1) Similarly, there is a reconciliation between analysis (taking the whole apart and looking at all of the

FIGURE 1*

TRIANGLES BROKEN AT ONE CORNER EACH SO THAT TWO TRIANGLES MAY BE COMBINED TO FORM A TETRAHEDRAN. A COMBINATION OF FOUR FORMS A CUBE WITH STRENGTH AND INTEGRITY.

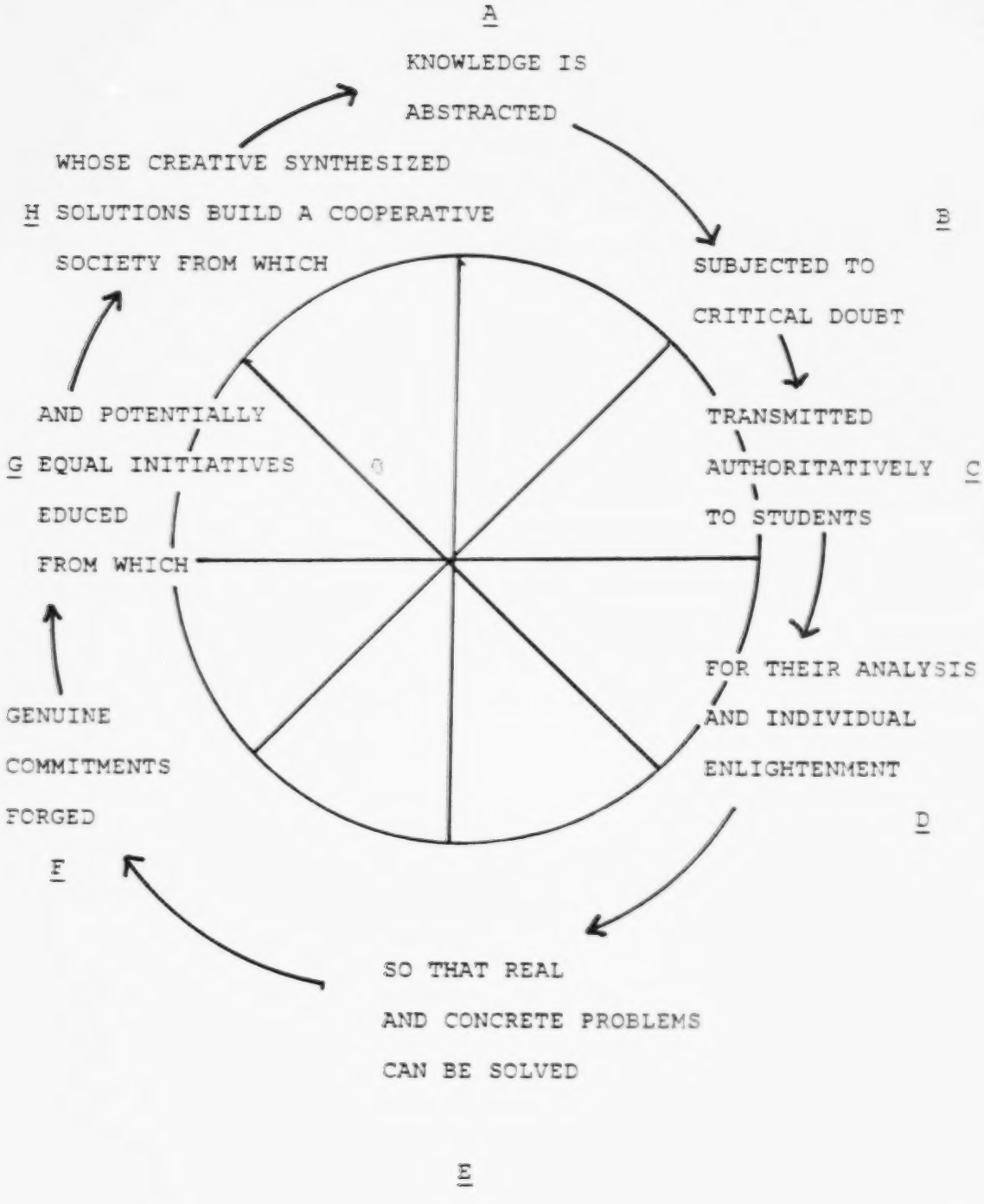


*Adapted from Map 42, Maps of the Mind, Charles Hampden-Turner.

components) and synthesis (collecting individual parts and forming the whole). These apparent opposite views are seen as working together. This is also seen in the content of education. Traditional methods thought of as authorities disseminating information as opposed to progressive attempts to initiate the natural abilities of students to acquire knowledge are cooperative ways of transmitting ideas rather than antagonistic ones. An overview shows conflicting values as first being polarized and then reconciled. This is expressed in Hampden-Turner's feedback loop. (Figure 2)

What will be attempted here is an application of the synergistic principles to a specific discipline in the humanities, namely, critical thinking in television broadcasting. Going back to the figurative metaphor, sides of the triangles are renamed to represent values and processes involved in creating and evaluating a miniature artistic as well as commercial television presentation -- the thirty-second spot. (Figure 3) When the opened triangles of our metaphor are synergized (combined) to make two tetrahedrons and then a cube, it is implied that "each aspect of learning is optimally integrated with the others creating a stability, coherence, and strength that begins to do justice to the brilliance of some minds." (Hampden-Turner, p. 151). If we concentrate on the A and B of the feedback loop in Figure 2 it will be interesting to consider abstracted knowledge which is then subjected to critical doubt. Applied to critical thinking in evaluating persuasive thirty-second spots, the information conveyed makes up the knowledge which must be questioned. Our improvised analogy takes the "idea" skillfully communicated in an aural-visual product (the thirty-second spot) and subjects it to "criticism" (the second triangle) looking at the commitment to

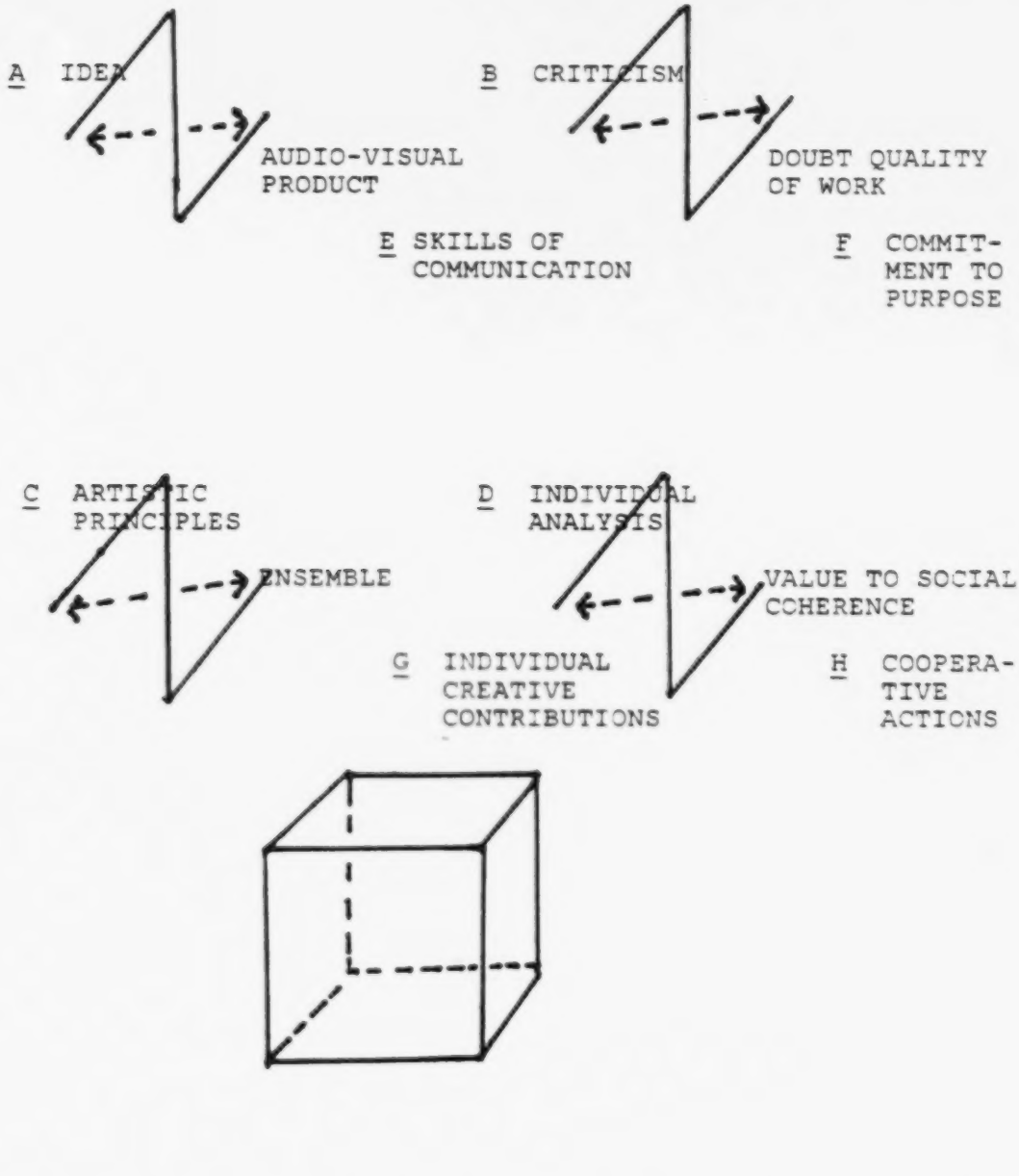
FIGURE 2 *



*Feeback loop from Charles Hampden-Turner's Maps of the Mind.

FIGURE 3*

TRIANGLES BROKEN AT ONE CORNER EACH SO THAT TWO TRIANGLES MAY BE COMBINED TO FORM A TETRAHEDRAN. A COMBINATION OF FOUR FORMS A CUBE WITH STRENGTH AND INTEGRITY.



*Adapted from Map 42, Maps of the Mind, Charles Hampden-Turner.

purpose and including doubt about the quality of the work. The semantical studies of Alfred Korzybski warn that "verbal-visual maps are tentative and hypothetical and always open to revision and amalgamation." (Hampden-Turner, p. 14). Neil Postman in "Critical Thinking in the Electronic Era" tells us that because of television and other visual media "knowing" means having pictures in your head more than sentences. (Postman, p. 48). He believes that language is being replaced by gestures, images, and formats of the arts of show business. Television provides us with an abundance of information but the form of the information requires a serious education in how to think. Analysis of what one sees and hears on television establishes a way to make the media problematic to students. Postman would agree but he tends to believe the only thing there is to analyze from television is performance, that it does not direct our attention to ideas which are abstract, sequential, slow moving and complex. He overlooks that formatting of ideas for television may in itself be abstract, sequential, and complex if not slow moving. And that there are differences in the quality and sophistication of communicating meanings and persuasions by means of television techniques, skills, and artistic principles.

Take, for example, three CLIO award-winning commercials from 1987. A Japanese commercial for National batteries begins with a brief voice-over introduction as a hand puts a toy fireman on a ladder placed against a skyscraper. It begins to climb with a hose over its shoulder. The ladder is a long, long, long ladder propped against the building. In silence (music background) we watch the toy fireman climb, steadily, step-by-step, step-by-

step.The camera views him from above, then below with the sky above. A jet plane is seen flying high overhead. The fireman continues to climb, steadily, and climb, until he finally reaches the top edge of the building. The picture changes. There is a close-up shot of a stream of water coming from the hose. The picture changes again and we see the stream of water extinguishing a smoldering cigarette. The voice-over, in Japanese, gives the name of the product as batteries are shown on the screen. We realize that the batteries were used as a backpack power supply for the climbing toy fireman. The idea in this case is to visually represent a fireman in action, a heroic action of getting to and putting out a fire. Because the idea is represented with a power-generated toy it is like a fairy tale, or at least a non-realistic story. The movement and sequence of pictures builds suspense. It builds the "fire" concept to a peak in the viewers minds so that the conclusion is humorous. It purposely fools the audience by engaging the imagination. But it holds attention until the "pitch" for the product is made. It entertains while it accomplishes it persuasive purpose, to impress potential buyers with the durable and dependable power in these batteries. The commercial was artistically conceived and skillfully planned and executed. It is a miniature work of theatrical art worthy of its award. What the viewer must keep in mind, as Korzybski suggests, is that this excellent "map" may not necessarily represent the "territory." That is, the batteries could be poor products or overpriced even though the commercial has fine theatrical value.

A second award-winning commercial from the United States is quite different. There are no pictures at all, only words and

sentences viewed with musical background. The sequence is as follows:

TO THE BLIND THIS SOUNDS LIKE A BEER COMMERCIAL

The next screen appears,

WHY ARE WE TYING TO FOOL THEM?

The next screen appears,

BECAUSE THEY ARE TOO PROUD TO ASK FOR MONEY

The next screen appears,

BUT THEY NEED IT

The next screen appears,

DESPERATELY

The next screen appears,

SEND YOUR TAX DEDUCTIBLE CONTRIBUTION TO:

The next screen appears,

AMERICAN COUNCIL OF THE BLIND

1010 VERMONT AVE. N.W.

WASHINGTON D.C. 20005

The next screen appears,

(BUT DON'T TELL THEM WE TOLD YOU)

The idea, of course, is to have viewers contribute to the American Council of the Blind. Thinking is generated by the word symbols used as silent verbal language and communicated by "reading skill." Viewers are made aware that blind persons do not have this special privilege of "sight" and that the auditory sense alone would be misleading in this instance, especially if one associated the type of music heard with beer commercials. There is an implication that what viewers are seeing on the screen has a higher social value than a beer commercial because there is an

altruistic motive underlying the message.

There is humor in the parenthetical statement that this will be kept secret. It stimulates a feeling of superiority in that viewers know something that the blind listeners do not. The superiority is only that they will be able to help without the blind knowing it. A contribution will be a good deed.

The surprise for television viewers is that this thirty-second spot has no pictures while appealing to their ability to view -- and read -- words. The difference between the concepts "blind" and "see" is clear. Combined with music the communication is both abstract and concrete. Meanings are doubled and real action (contribute) is possible and expected.

A final example combines visual images with carefully selected words to produce affective impressions concerning life-and-death. Though the visual sequences are very realistic the framework is like a video game, and therefore, only metaphorically life threatening. This thirty-second spot was made in England.

The camera view is as if the individual viewer is operating a video game automobile steering wheel to simulate driving through city streets at high speeds. One can hear the simulated buzz of an automobile. The hazards then appear. A baby buggy moves in front of the auto. There is a crash and the buggy is seen flying up in front of the windshield. The word MANSLAUGHTER appears on the screen. The automobile begins again. This time a child dashes in front of the car. The steering wheel turns to avoid the child but in so doing smashes into the side of another automobile. The word SUICIDE appears on the screen. The automobile starts moving through traffic once again. A motorcycle rider suddenly

swerves in front of the car. There is no time to change direction. There is a collision. The word MANSLAUCHTER is seen on the screen a second time. The automobile starts to move rapidly for a final time. A dog runs into the street. The driver behind the wheel (the viewer) turns to the right to avoid the dog but runs up onto the sidewalk filled with pedestrians. There is a stop action shot. The picture changes to a circle with 30 in the middle. Underneath are the words SLOW DOWN. A male voice says, "How long before you you realize it's not a game."

The combination of the visual sequences and words timed in a fast-paced rhythm communicates a powerful message. The game of driving combined with realistic traffic film clips becomes both thrilling and tragic. Word symbols punctuate the tragic results. The consequences are too serious to be taken lightly even though the game would appear to be "fun." There is little time to think about this information while viewing it in thirty seconds. The visual information seems concrete while the word symbols emphasize the social concepts. But both work together.

It is interesting to note that there are no "performers" in any of these thirty-second spots. People in the traffic scenes are real (probably film clips). The toy fireman has no facial expression. He is a little robot and the unseen voice only names the product. There are no actors performing roles, no visible personalities to evaluate. Viewer involvement is at a high level. Analysis can focus on the idea the sequence, the music combined with words, the rhythm, the editing, the dramatic structure, the "thinking" behind the scenes, and the thinking required of the viewers.

Looking back at Hampden-Turner`s feedback loop what is being transmitted authoritatively to students in an analysis of what one sees and hears on television is a way of questioning the abstract and concrete aspects of information. Information is received through the senses, particularly sight and hearing when watching television. It is important for students to realize that information manipulated can be and often is "disinformation." This is a term that has emerged from deliberate attempts to use media to give an illusion of knowing when the manipulators of the information have a specific and often persuasive motive in mind. As Postman points out disinformation does not mean false information. Rather it is information that is misleading, fragmented, irrelevant, or superficial. What is meant in television communication to be concrete and informative, abstract and connotative, real or imagined, fragmented or complete, must be sorted out by the thinking viewer. This takes awareness and practice.

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